THE JOURNEY
Exodus 14:5-18, Mark 1:16-20
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It's a marvelous story. Under the cover of darkness, the children of Israel pack up and leave Egypt. After a series of plagues and calamities and some uncompromising negotiating by Moses, Pharoh is finally convinced that there is a connection between his domestic problems and the presence of these restless Hebrew tribes. And so at night the order comes: "Go. Pack up and leave. Take your cattle, your herds of sheep, your belongings and get out of here." and so they left, loaded down with the unleavened dough and the jewelry they had taken from the Egyptians on the way out. They strapped their kneading bowls to their backs, got the grandparents and the children organized, rounded up the goats and the sheep and the cat and dog, looked around at the old neighborhood one last time, and walked - into the wilderness.

Promised land? Not for forty years... For a whole generation it's going to be wilderness, homelessness, lostness. They headed south, but they didn't take the good Philistine roads, the shortest route to the Promised Land. Moses led them on a tortuous, circuitous, roadless route, "by way of the wilderness," the ancient writer tells us, to the Red Sea. And the sense of it is that whatever else is going on with them, the journey itself is important. It's not simply the quickest, most convenient way to get from slavery to freedom. The getting there is literally half the fun and more than half the significance. There is growing and deepening and becoming that has to happen on the journey.

As they make camp at one of those places with an unpronounceable name, the people back at Pharoh's palace are having some second thoughts. If you have ever acted out of deep emotion, deep feeling and then, in the clear light of morning, after sleeping on it, found yourself wondering how you so totally took leave of your senses; if you have ever written a letter in anger and made the mistake of mailing it instead of carrying it around at least two days before sending it, you know this dynamic. In the distilled light of morning the Egyptian advisors to Pharoh gather and are overheard saying things like: "What in the world have we done? What came over us? We have let our slaves go free! There went the labor force..think of the economic implications!"

So - Pharoh mobilizes his forces, gathers his chariots and infantry, and they head south taking the Philistine roads one assumes and their advance parties tell them that there is a very large encampment at Pi-hahiroth, near the Sea of Reeds.

Meanwhile, in the camp the Hebrews are just beginning to deal with the enormity of the decision they had made. They had been living in Egypt for a long time - longer than we and our ancestors have lived on this continent. Their sojourn in Egypt was for several centuries. It was home. And here they are on the edge of a wilderness! There are no houses. The availability of food and water depends on their finding it. Thre are no sanitary facilities, no hospitals, schools, restaurants, tennis courts! There is nothing at Pi-hahiroth, or in the wilderness ahead that resembles the accouterments of civilization which they had in Egypt. The enormity of all that was just beginning to sink in when one morning they noticed dust on the south horizon. Apart from a great wind there was only one thing in the world that made a dust cloud like that - the horses and chariots and carts and wagons and tramping feet of an advancing army. One can only begin to imagine how that must have

been: the terror, the dry tightness in the throat and chest, the men - the women - the fathers and the mothers - the ones, who in the final analysis, had made the fateful decisions, the ones who had roused their sleeping children and made the leaving sound like an adventure: the ones who had shaken their aging parents awake and said, "Now...come - it's happening! We're going home...You're not going to die in an Egyptian bed and be buried in Egyptian soil."

One can only begin to imagine the intensity, the fear and anger that raged within them when they saw that advancing cloud of dust. One can even understand the bitterness of what they said to Moses: "Were there no graves in Egypt, that you should have brought us here to die in the wilderness? See what you have done to us. Is this not what we meant when we said in Egypt, 'Leave us alone. We would rather be slaves than die here in the wilderness.'"

Given the intensity of all of that, there is no more pathetic, nor brave answer than what Moses said to them: "Fear not: stand firm. See the salvation of the Lord which he will work for you today."

What comes next, of course, is the unlikely escape, the crossing of the Sea of Reeds, and the commencement of forty years of wandering in the desert wilderness of the Sinai. I like this part of the story best, however: the part at the beginning when the enormity of life's decisions becomes very clear; when everybody starts having second thoughts - Pharoh about letting them go, the Israelites about going, and with their backs to the sea and the army advancing, the people make a simple observation that this wilderness journey is risky business, that life was a lot simpler and safer back in Egyptian slavery.

I like this part of the story because it is so very human. You and I may not know what it means to have a burning bush religious experience: we may never have a shining moment of religious clarity on some Mt. Sinai, but we surely know what those people were saying and feeling. We know about complaining in the wilderness. I like it because of the sense that the fermenting, unsettling, disturbing power in the story is coming from God. God leads them out of bondage - into the wilderness - on the way to some distant promised land a lot of them are not going to see. The journey is it for them: the trip is the locus of religious experience. Moses himself is not going to make it over the final river; the journey is what his life will be about.

God apprehends them in their wilderness: comes to them, finds them, loves them, judges them, gives order and reason to their life, and makes them into who he wants them to be - on the journey.

I like what this story says about God and the journey of life which each of us travels, a journey which sometimes requires us to leave comfort and security and to sojourn awhile by the wilderness. I like it because the journey is a powerful metaphor for human life, and its meaning is enhanced by the close personal experience of moving.

Apart from that, the process of simply living life is a journey, the destination of which none of us really knows. the first major life task any of us undertakes is moving away from the security and safety of our mother's womb and for the next two decades, the task of preparing for life apart from the security and safety of our parents will occupy us totally. Psychiatrist Bruno Bettelheim, in that wonderful book The Uses of Enchantment, points out that this dynamic is a major motif in children's stories and fairy tales.

"Being pushed out of the home stands for having to become oneself. Self-realization requires leaving the orbit of the home, an excrutiatingly painful experience." (p. 79)

Among the more painful experiences I can recall are the days on which my parents abandoned me in a college dormitory, helped me move into a room, and actually got back into the Dodge and drove away without me...and the days three decades later when I did the same thing. The every day normality of life calls us to the journey and it is often a matter of leaving safety and security. It hurts and it is frightening both ways - both as young person and as parent. But we know the wisdom of it. We know that the creator's plan is implicated in the separation, the packing up and moving out.

Life is a journey. Taking a new position, assuming new responsibilities, moving to a new community carries with it the unsettled anxiety of leaving behind a job one knows, a community one has come to call home, and friends one has come to love deeply. (It has taken us a decade to verbalize our loyalty to Ohio State football with our Purdue friends to the west and our Penn State and Pittsburgh friends to the east and truly the purple cast to this present wilderness is at least in part from the colors of Northwestern University.)

What riskier traveling than chosing - at 21 or 22 - our life's work! Who knows where it will lead, or even if we're on the right road? What more hazardous journeying than to stand here in our early twenties beside one person and promise to love, honor, respect this woman/man who I don't really even know, and whose emerging personhood, whose growing into whatever she will become is every bit as much of a hidden mystery, as mine is to me. Who knows at 25 if you're going to love the person that bride will become two decades from now?

Every growing, every becoming is something of a journey into a new land, cut off from safe security. Every intellectual or spiritual growing is accompanied by a sense of uneasiness, wariness, fear, because it involves leaving behind honored and time-worn certainties. Whether the topic is that the world is round, not flat - or that God has indeed created all people equal, or that women are as capable of professionnl expertise as men - or that all popular revolutions in the world are not necessarily mortal threats to our national security. And all of us need to hear this old, old story with its intriguing suggestion that God is the one who leads us on that journey and that the uncertainty of traveling is part of the plan and also the place where he will find us.

Sometimes the wilderness does not seem to fit in any plan. Sometimes the wilderness makes no sense, and we are literally dragged into it by forces out of our control. Sometimes the wilderness descends on us of its own volition, or approaches on the far horizon ominously like that Egyptian dust cloud. A spouse dies, without warning, without reason and one day we are in a wilderness of alonness, cut off from every structure of meaning and joy and security...or...the position for which we have been grooming, preparing, readying, opens and passes in front of our eyes and is given to someone else and we are in a very deep wilderness of disappointment and self deprecation...or...the youngest child approaches graduation and our universe of meaning, the tasks which have commanded our attention, summoned our strength and given reason to our being, are clearly at an end, ~~and the name of this wilderness is meaninglessness~~...or...social cocktails have become a twice daily ritual, and we keep denying what we read about addiction as we feel it happening and we can't summon the strength to admit to ourselves that this wilderness is alcoholism

...or...it is not death, but dying: it is not divorce but the slow atrophy of a once lively and ecstatic love; it is not life in full revolt but the Sunday morning sense that the atheists of history knew more than the people of faith and a once comfortable faith has turned brittle dry in the wilderness called hopelessness.

None of us will avoid all of those wildernesses, and when we are there, it will be good to recall that in the Bible the wilderness is precisely the place where God apprehends his people. The journey away from all the safe, secure certainties is the time and place where God choses to do his loving and saving.

The life of Christian faith is a journey. It has been so since Jesus of Nazareth walked by the Sea of Galilee and called Simon and Andrew, James and John to discipleship. Even though our propensity is to define religion as believing certain ideas about God to be true, Jesus forever defined it as a journey, a getting up from where you are, and a following, a leaving behind the security and certainty of families, fishing nets, and traveling with Jesus: in nearer terms - a letting go of ideas, political certainties, social truisms, financial realities and going along with the Lord. We Presbyterians, particularly, need to recover that. Our faith is expressed in our theologizing and theorizing about the human situation. It is expressed in our orderly traditions, and our liturgical stateliness. But faith ultimately is that singular act getting up and walking away from something, following Jesus on the journey of discipleship.

We'd like to know the destination. We are careful people. Our prudence and caution serves us well mostly and we are suspicious of the kind of religious zealotry that might walk away from the good life in order to be a missionary. We might even do that if we had some intellectual clarity. We'd like to know who is leading us. We'd like, finally and ultimately, to know that there is a God and that Jesus is his son and this business has, if not an eternal guarantee, at least a life time warranty.

And the mystery of it all is that on the journey God apprehends his people. All he does with them ahead of time is make them restless. When they follow into the wilderness, when they leave fishing nets behind and follow, he apprehends them, comes to them, judges them, loves them.

The theologians have understood it, none more precisely than Dietrich Bonhoeffer who helped us see that you don't believe in Jesus until you obey him. The mystics, at their best, have experienced it. God comes, God saves, as we sojourn in the wilderness of solitude. And we too have known. God has come - on the journey - God will continue to come into our wilderness. In the words of the old Welsh Hymn:

"When I tread the verge of Jordan
Bid my anxious fears subside.
Death of death and Hell's destruction
Land me safe on Canaan's side."

Now to the One who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus, to all generations for ever and ever. Amen.